

Joel Roberts Poinsett to Andrew Jackson, January 27, 1833, from Correspondence of Andrew Jackson. Edited by John Spencer Bassett.

Charleston, January 27, 1833.

Private.

My dear Sir, The crisis of our affairs is so rapidly approaching and they appear to be so little understood, that I have thought it proper to give you an exact and detailed statement of them in order, that you may resolve understandingly the course, which ought to be pursued.

The plan proposed in your last message 1 will effectually frustrate the process of Nullification. The Leaders of that party feel and acknowledge this, and in order to avoid the disgrace, which will attend their failure, they have held language, which in the excess of their folly they believed might intimidate and induce Congress not to grant powers, which they declare to be so tyrannical as at once to compel the State of So. Ca. to secede from the Union. They have since heard from their friends in Washington that congress will undoubtedly and by a large majority pass the acts and grant the powers asked for by you. They met—the principal Leaders—the day before yesterday, and I am just informed, that they resolved to call the convention together immediately as they received intelligence of the reports of the judiciary Committees being favorable to your views. Such information is communicated to them by express. They will then be in readiness and on the passage of the act, the state will be declared out of the Union. My attention was called yesterday and today to the unusual activity of their warlike preparations and the cause appears to be the one I have assigned. They will instantly bring down their troops to the coast and if possible

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strike a blow. I have visited the forts and carefully examined their situation. Fort Moultrie is nearly in a state of defence. It is picketed on the land

1 Message of Dec. 4, 1832.

side well and solidly and the work is in progress on the side next the sea, which is the weakest. The greatest activity prevails and great exertions are making to complete the interiour arrangements. Captn. Ripley, 2 who superintends them is an able and indefatigable officer. Castle Pinckney is safe, I think, both from the position and nature of the work, and from the character of Captain Saunders, 3 who commands there. Fort Johnson on the opposite shore is abandoned, and I have always thought it injudicious to leave that site to be occupied by the enemy. It commands the approach to the city seaward and might be made to annoy the vessels of war, which it may be necessary to send in to our harbour, for they must pass under and near the guns of any battery that might be erected there. The old works have been washed away; but field works might be soon constructed strong enough to keep off a sudden attack and the vessels of war could approach near enough to sustain the garrison. There is close by a Martello tower which would render those works impregnable agst militia, if occupied by a few artillerymen and three pieces of heavy artillery. This tower was built by the government during the war upon land belonging to the state and which never has been ceded to the United States. It ought to be occupied or pulled down, or blown up. And I am sure you will agree with me, that the site of fort Johnson ought to be occupied without delay and some temporary works thrown up there. I am aware there are not troops enough to occupy all these points, and that is the reason I am so anxious you should know the exact state of things here. A company arrived a few days ago from Savannah, and was immediately sent back by Col. Bankhead 4 because they could not be well accommodated at Fort Moultrie. They might have been usefully employed at Fort Johnson and accommodated there. The Col. told me that the officers were Nullifiers; but I cannot deem so basely of any american officer as to believe, that he would tarnish his honour by refusing to do his duty against the enemies of his Country, whatever might [be] his opinions on abstract rights—at all events if these

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Officers—Beltons Company 5 are so tainted they might be replaced. I am assured the men are sound and will do their duty—if well led. The vessels in the harbour will be efficient auxiliaries and I suppose this description of force could be increased, and I should deem it adviseable to do so.

2 Capt. James Wolfe Ripley, in command at Charleston, afterward chief of ordnance and (1865) brevet major-general.

3 Capt. Henry Saunders, 1st Artillery.

4 Lt.-Col. James Bankhead, 3d Artillery.

5 Capt. Francis S. Belton, 2d Artillery, afterward distinguished in the Mexican War.

In the city we are nearly equally divided. At present the opposite party have the advantage of publicly drilling and preparing and in the opinion of the people of acting under colour of the law. Our party will not turn out in all its force unless sustained by the countenance and authority of the general government. I find it difficult to organize the whole of the party, because they fear they are offending the laws by preparing to attack the constituted authorities of the State. Under the authority of the government they are ready to act whenever called into the field. This feeling pervades the whole Union party throughout the state, and would I fear paralyse their action without the intervention of the federal government. What I am most anxious to have decided is when and in what manner the government will or ought to interfere. If the plan proposed in the message is pursued there will be an end of nullification and the State will secede. If the government still continues to pursue the same measures, or converts them into a blockade and confines us within our own limits, maintaining merely the works in the harbour and a line upon our frontier the result must eventually be successfull; but the struggle within our own limits would be desperate and protracted—a civil war of a cruel nature would inevitably ensue. The Leaders of the Nullification party are endeavouring to prepare the minds of their followers for this result. Their papers teem with abuse against us and an attempt is being made to

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show, that all the hostility exercised against their measures originate in us and especially from my counsel and advice. Their followers are extremely irritated and ready to attack us. They are restrained only by fear inspired by our organisation, which however defective imposes some respect upon these lawless men. They would cease to fear or respect us if they had possession of the city with two or three thousand men from the Country. I beseech you to believe that in making this statement I do not wish Government to be influenced by any considerations of our safety. But I think you ought to understand the precise state of the Country and the relative position of the parties which divide it to form a correct opinion of the course to be adopted. The Union party in the city is too weak to contend with any probability of success against the Nullifiers after they shall be reinforced from the Country; and they are not able I fear to do more than protect themselves in the interior. Indeed they doubt their power to do even that. I consider then that a blockade by sea and land would be attended with ultimate success; but would be attended likewise with great loss of life and the total destruction of the property of the State. The next measure that presents itself is to have a sufficient force to take and hold possession of Charleston and at the same time to enter the State by the North Carolina boundary and at once and by one blow suffocate this rebellion. I believe this would be instantly successful. Only a few Desperate men would take the field. The majority of these blusterers would remain at home. The whole Union party would unite with the Government forces, and be ready to take upon themselves the civil government of the State. The people are averse to war. They have been constantly deluded and led to believe the remedy proposed by their Leaders was peaceful, and even now they are told they will have to contend only against a minority in the state, and have only to assume a bold front to be safe from any attack from the general government. The exhibition of the forces in this harbour has produced a good effect; but still they are taught to believe, that if the state secedes, these forces must vanish from the soil of Carolina. I do not believe that five thousand men could be brought into the field if the government advanced in force; and if it advances at all it would be both politic and humane to do so with an overwhelming force, and I am sure that 12,000 * 6

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men would appear in the field at the call of the govt. to sustain the laws and preserve the union.

6 [*Note in original:*] "I am told this is too large an estimate and that 8,000 would be nearer the truth."

It is a singular fact, that in the extensive emigration now going on from our middle Country we count two nullifiers for one Union man flying from the fury of the storm they themselves have raised.

Against this plan the Nullifiers presume upon the sympathy of the neighbouring states being excited in their favour if the country was invaded by the overwhelming power of the federal government. This would certainly be the case if the state were united; but we are a numerous and respectable party and fortunately they have been so unwise as to persecute us. I do not think it would be difficult to excite the sympathy of those states in our favour and to show, that such a movement on the part of government was rendered necessary to protect those, who had periled their lives in support of the laws and for the preservation of the union. This plan too has the great advantage of despatch; and I am perfectly sure, that the nullifiers will gain strength by delay. They are indefatigable in their exertions to gain proselytes in the southern states and have been but too successfull. In this State two years ago no one dared advocate nullification much less Secession and now these terms are the watchwords of a majority in the State.

The next plan which presents itself to my mind is to occupy Charleston with a sufficient force and let the upper districts of Greenville and Spartanburg maintain themselves independent and furnish a safe asylum to the Unionists, who will be compelled to fly from the middle country either to the city or to the mountains. These forces collected at the two points, after a sufficient time had been given to concentrate a sufficient number, and, dissafection had done its work in the ranks of their opponents, might be able of themselves to quell this sedition.

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I have thus laid before you the only plans which suggest themselves to my mind as likely to put down these men—and I am disposed to believe that which will be attended with the greatest despatch is the best. In time the contagion will spread into Georgia and N'th Carolina if the disease is not arrested in its progress here. It will I am aware require several days before the forces could be collected upon the North Carolina line; but Charleston might be occupied at once and the state deprived of all the ammunition, arms and military stores, which have been lately collected in their arsenals in the City. The citadel is in a very exposed situation and could be taken by a small force before it could be succoured. Indeed it could not hold out two hours, if properly attacked, even if the whole force of the Nullifiers were concentrated there. The magazine, which contains their powder is accessible to barges; and might be taken without the loss of a man. By the way there is about 500 kegs of powder belonging to individual merchants, members of the Union party, which might be bought up by government on an emergency.

The approaches to the city are easily guarded agt. very superiour numbers, when, as in this case, there is a naval force to protect the flanks. At the narrowest part of the neck the distance from River to River does not exceed three quarters of a mile, and a redoubt or two, works already existing would effectually check any force the state, or to speak more correctly the Leaders of the nullification party, could bring against them. But few regular troops would suffice to man these works, and our militia could take care of the city.

With respect to the city you ought to be informed that at a moderate computation three fourths of the houses belong to the union party and we have reason to dread that the vagabonds of the opposite party will fire the town whenever we have a contest with them. We fear too, that if the state troops should fire upon the castle, that fortress will set fire to the city. I have heard the officers talk of this. If the nullifiers believed this they would not hesitate to commence an attack which would be so fatally injurious to us. If this, the firing upon the castle, were to take place before the arrival of the forces from the Country it would be much better to attack and carry the city, which could be done easily with our

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assistance. This is another reason for occupying the city upon the first array of forces in the interior; for after two or three thousand men are in the town, the castle would be compelled to fire on the city in order to protect itself; and such an act however justified by the circumstances of the case would indispose the people and serve as a pretext to excite sympathy in other States. I mentioned in a former letter that Genl. Scott ought to be here as soon as possible. I am daily made more sensible of this necessity. I should think that with the forces in Augusta and Savannah and at Smithville added to the troops here a movement might be made upon the city at any time—and I repeat my belief, that Charleston once in our possession the Nullifiers will be paralysed. We shall deprive them of their part of artillery and a large part of their arms and ammunition by such a movement.

When I began this letter I intended to have sent it by an ordinary express; but the situation of our affairs is so critical, that I have decided to despatch a gentleman entirely in my confidence, who will be able to explain to you the difficulties under which we labour and to impart to you the usefulness if not the necessity of our receiving the aid of the federal government and the propriety of our acting under your orders. I shall explain to Mr. James H. Smith my views very fully, and you will find him full of intelligence and zeal, and able to give you detailed and accurate information of the plans and strength of the opposite party, as his brothers unfortunately are leaders among them. The number of their volunteers has increased very much lately and it is certain, that they have received offers of service from some persons in N'th Carolina and Georgia. I have likewise received intimations from respectable sources in those states that volunteers were ready to march to aid the Union party in Carolina.

Let me beg of you to act cautiously in the matter of the Leaders of Nullification now in Washington. Do not make a Martyr of a scoundrel. No punishment can be so dreadful to him as to have the finger of scorn pointed at him for the remainder of his miserable life.

I am, Dear Sir, very respectfully and faithfully your Obt. Servt.